

Zulprianto Looking on the Bright Side of  
Grammar-Translation Method

## LOOKING ON THE BRIGHT SIDE OF GRAMMAR-TRANSLATION METHOD

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### Abstract

In spite of having been rejected as a method in language teaching, the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) has never been totally left out. Among the rejections to the GTM are because the language learners' native language is used as the medium of instruction and the grammar is taught deductively. However, GTM is composed of two features hardly inescapable in any discussion about language teaching: grammar and translation. If grammar serves as a medium to know about the form of language, translation can interlingually guide the way to comprehending the meaning of language. This article is aimed to explain the importance of grammar and translation in language teaching and to propose some modifications of the ways in which both can be taught that can possibly restore the bright side of the GTM to some extent.

**Keywords:** Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), grammar, translation

### INTRODUCTION

The teaching of English remains interesting and important to talk about in the Indonesian context. Before going further, I would like to show a brief remark about English in Indonesia, its importance and its teaching in reality. On one hand, the government fully aware of the importance of English for the people to be able to take part in the international intercourses, not only confining to those coming from countries in which English is their mother tongue, but also those where they use it as the second language. As one of the languages officially used for United Nations' affairs, English is now enjoying being the most spoken language in the world and is

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expected to remain so in many years to come. On the other hand, results of teaching the international language in Indonesia have not achieved the expected target yet. For that reason, Indonesia still needs to work harder to make English available in the society. Nowadays, all resources seem to be written in English. Unfortunately, most Indonesians do not have the chance yet to read them because of language barrier or until they are translated into Indonesian.

It is discouraging that the government has recently decided to change the status of English teaching for elementary school students; the government altered the status from a compulsory subject to an optional one. It means any elementary schools are welcomed to keep teaching the subject in their schools, but on their own necessity and cost. Interestingly, the reason behind the conversion of the status according to the Deputy of the Minister of Education and Culture, Musliar Kasim, is to give more opportunities for the students to strengthen their mastery and competence in Indonesian, the national language, before getting acquainted with other languages. Many view the policy as a setback. The decision seems to owe more to the emotional rather than scientific consideration as there is no harm in learning two or more languages simultaneously. The statement also implies as if Indonesian were in danger and English is responsible for such circumstance.

From the scientific point of view, the policy is far from justifiable because researchers in language learning have indicated the difficulty to learn language after puberty. The children are believed to enjoy a critical period for language learning before they reach their puberty; very likely the years spent by students in elementary schools. This neurological explanation is in line with what Steven Pinker (in Emmitt and Pollock, 1997:188) argues 'there are biological advantages in terms of safety and survival for vulnerable infants to learn language very rapidly, but once having accomplished this, the advantages for such rapid learning ability disappears'. With this in mind, should the government cancel any activity of English teaching, it should be better executed in higher education level.

At tertiary education too English teaching has been argued to be far from effective. Apart from what Pinker argues above, English teaching for students of tertiary education has posed some technical and substantial problems. Here, English classes are normally very big, attended by so many students that it prevents effective teaching from taking place. Even the best teachers of English are likely to give up such a situation. Moreover, many English teachers are not specialized in English teaching, but lecturers who happen to spend some years abroad. Such conditions in any case can lead to the opinion of the students that the subject is not seriously taught and there is no reason why they should learn it in reverse. The attitude to the subject or to English in general is another influential factor to the success of language

learning. Ironically, English is a compulsory subject to be taught in higher education and written in the Act of National Education System which implies its importance for students.

In addition to the troubles above, another factor is likely to play a role. A factor pertinent with method use to teach English. I would like to specifically discuss about the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM); a which was questioned and rejected. After dominating foreign language teaching in Europe from the 1840s to the 1940s. This article seeks to propose some perspectives on the good sides of GTM and its modifications, that may come handy in language teaching. I am not pretending the article will attempt to bring back the forgotten method into life again, but simply offering a few insights can be modified for our own needs. In fact, even though the method has been long forgotten, its modified forms continue to be widely used in some parts of the world today (Richards & Rodgers, 1986:4).

Methods in language teaching come and go. GTM is among the oldest methods. Interestingly, despite being forgotten, GTM and other methods have never been neglected totally. It may not be attainable in its original forms, but in its modified versions. Perhaps, it is due to the fact that 'grammar' and 'translation', from which the method is named after, are two issues unlikely inevitable in any remarks of language either in theory or in practice. While the study of grammar can lead learners to knowing about the forms or structures of one language, the practices of translation particularly for second language learners can test the comprehension.

The development of new methods in language teaching presupposes that novel ways of teaching language have been found and are worth trying for. However, such novelty does not offer totally different ideas compared to the older one. In one way or another, one method has something in common with the previous methods because, theoretically speaking, its emergence was triggered by the weakness found embedded in the former method. If GTM is for instance rejected for its favor of teaching grammar deductively, the later methods such as the Reading Approach and the Audiolingual Method, to mention some of them, indeed cannot avoid teaching grammar at all; they continue to teach it, but in different ways and emphasis.

The advent of methods in language teaching, particularly English teaching, is connected to the issues of language skills. It has been long-established language skills are classified into four: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. While some experts argue there is no harm in teaching them concurrently, others prefer to teach them consecutively. Other researchers in language learning, regardless of which skill to teach first, are aware of the importance of putting the four skills in a single method in which they can be treated evenly. This can explain why new methods in language learning.

develop as the time goes. However, to invent a full-packaged method as such turns out to be difficult. Worse, time given for language study in school is not sufficient to develop the four skills.

The GTM is usually used in the following ways. The classes are taught in the students' mother tongue. It begins with detailed analysis of focused-grammar rules and applies this grammatical knowledge to translate sentences into and out of the target language. In addition, vocabulary is isolated, and texts/sentences are used for grammar analysis and therefore are not taken for their content. In general, the GTM is considered a teaching methodology that isolates language from its communicative function.

Therefore, the GTM is at least said to be ineffective for two chief reasons. First, the class uses the students' native language as the medium of instruction. Second, it focuses too much on the details or intricacies of grammar of the target language. The GTM then overlooks the importance of, for example, speaking, pronunciation, listening, and so forth. Unlike the GTM, the Direct Method for example begins the class with a dialogue using a modern conversational style in the target language which gives much time for the learners to improve their speaking competence (Hughes, 1968). It is my intention below to observe the bright side of the GTM by arguing the importance of grammar and translation in language learning and offering some modifications of the GTM as a method in language teaching.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this part I shall expect to give details about both grammar and translation in a separate way. The sum of the explanation hopefully will help elucidate why the knowledge about grammar or the practice of translation stays important for the second language learners in one way or another.

### **Grammar**

The term 'grammar' is so popular that it is needless to define. People seem to know its definition by heart. The key point in grammar is of course its regulating force. Grammar then will guide the speakers to form correct sentences. Defying grammar can end up the speakers with producing incorrect sentences. If the language structure is broken down into unit such as phonemes, morphemes, words, phrases, and sentences, grammar is usually associated with how the last two (phrases and sentences) are formed. However, if grammar is viewed from a wider perspective, in that it is defined as any kinds of regulations of one language, grammar is also applicable to the lower units of the language. It regulates words, morphemes, and even phonemes and explains their regularity. This is easy to prove as the sequence

of sounds which form a morpheme in English or in other languages is not randomly made.

The horror attached to grammar is certainly associated with its prescribing nature. Theoretically speaking, the grammar of a language is a materialization of the speakers' shared knowledge of their language. Grammar then acclimatizes the speakers to be mutually intelligible one another. In linguistics, there are two prominent polarizations of grammarians: the prescriptivists and descriptivists. If the former prescribe the kind of language the speakers of the language should say, the latter do not; the speakers enjoy the freedom to speak as they do.

Prescriptivists certainly set some rules that strictly govern how the speakers should use the language. It can be imagined how frustrating these strict limitations are for the language learners to cope with. The rules, psychologically speaking, if it is insistently imposed, can discourage the learners from experimenting with the language. In fact, both prescriptivists and descriptivists agree more on how their language should work compared to what they disagree. Learning from grammar books, prescriptive grammarians indeed only list a few 'forbidden postulates'. Do not end you sentence with a preposition and do not make double negative a single sentence are among the most quoted prescriptions of the prescriptivists. On the other hand, descriptivists have no problems with such prescriptions. They merely see it as a language variation. It is then the prescriptive grammarians who play more to the horror of using grammar in language teaching.

In general, I would argue that teaching grammar is important and beneficial for the second language learners for several reasons. Firstly, a speaker with grammar knowledge is comparable to a driver with a mechanical knowledge. A driver who is a mechanic at the same time is a favorable situation, of course. Any time the car he drives breaks down, he can fix it even without help from others. The case is relatively true for a speaker who has sufficient grammar knowledge. The speaker knows exactly how to produce a correct sentence and distinguish it from an incorrect one. What makes the driver and the speaker in that sense different is that the driver normally knows why the car breaks down after its breaking down; meanwhile, the speakers with grammar knowledge knows an (un)grammatical sentence even before they utter it. However, there is something that they have in common: they can secure a peace of mind in their actions.

Secondly, teaching grammar is essential for second language learners. In this case, it is assumed, it is less important for learners to learn grammar of their first language than of their second language. The reason for this is because speakers of the first language reside in the community in which the

language is used. They acquire, not learn, the language. Therefore, they get benefit from such social circumstances. On the other hand, the learners of the second language normally do not enjoy such advantage. Even so, in my opinion, it is still necessary for the native speakers of one language to learn about the grammar of their first language, but with different purposes: to boost their status from the common users of their language to the expert ones.

Whether or not learners live in the community where the language is used surely makes a difference. Learners living in the place where the language being learned is spoken enjoys much exposure to its resources right from the primary sources. They even gain direct cultural experience of the language. Furthermore, the speakers can skip the necessity to search around for ways to express, let us say, a new sentence as the sentences are empirically available. In contrast, learners of second language may have to do trial and error and make prediction whenever they want to produce new sentences. It is in this very situation where grammar is needed for. Grammar, like all science, gives language learners the power to creatively predict and in turn to produce correct sentences. With such power, learners can enjoy generating infinite numbers of sentences with certain grammatical rules. In this case, grammar indeed makes the analogy, which is the nature of any language, possible.

*Thirdly*, as stated in the Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG), grammar consists of finite sets of rules. Because of finite in number, they are learnable and can even be memorized. With these finite rules of grammar, speakers can produce infinite number of utterances, a notion referred back to the Humboldtian conception. On the other hand, it is impossible for the speakers to encounter all potential utterances of one language despite being compiled in a large corpus as the corpus itself is an endless business. This is also the critique by proponent of TGG to the Structuralists. Chomsky (1965) sees a corpus in the nature of things can only provide a partial and selective picture of a language and to some extent it may not be worthy of referring to as 'A record of natural speech will show numerous false starts, deviations from the rules, changes of plan in mid-course, and so on. Speakers of one language hear and produce new utterances any time they involve in conversation with their fellow speakers. However, there is nothing new about the grammar of their utterances, even if the words used are newly coined. The use of language is both productive and creative.

In addition, Palmer (1971), apart from its productivity, language is characterized by its complexity and arbitrariness. Grammar can help unravel the complexities of language and simplify them. Likewise, language is also arbitrary and therefore there is no one to one relation between sound and

meaning. However, grammar can help us figure out the shared characteristics of languages. Grammar is in fact part of the language which shows steadiness. Unlike vocabulary which may come and go in particular course of time, grammar tends to stay put and so does the speakers' grammar knowledge then. If the vocabulary of one language is the flesh, the bone is its grammar (Hassal, 2011).

## Translation

There are at least two reasons why translation is considered ineffective as a method in language teaching. *Firstly*, translation requires the students to write as they are asked to write their translation. Such activity takes time and of course is not suitable for very young English learners who have not gained their writing skills. But there seems to be no problem, except for its time-consuming, if it is applied for literate English learners. The objection to using translation in English teaching is indeed because it favors the writing skill than the others which some consider as against the nature. However, the English learners do not have to write down their products of translation; they can deliver them orally in order to save time.

*Secondly*, in relation to the first notion above, the reluctance to use translation has something to do with the origin of language. Sound comes first and then the graphic (writing system). Put it differently, spoken language has been long-established before the invention of writing system. That is the nature of language acquisition and it is worth emulating it in that way. Consequently, learning language should follow suit. The notion is normally endorsed by explaining the analogy of how infants acquire their first language, which is definitely the spoken language. Proponents of such idea will put speaking skill as the first and main priority in language teaching. It makes sense though. However, if the English learners are not, again, illiterate, the notion becomes weaker.

In my opinion, translation, like grammar, is applicable in language learning particularly for second language learners. In general, people learn language with the help of another language. To be more specific, students understand the meaning of a word because it is paraphrased with other words. Such a kind of process can occur either intralingually or interlingually. While in the former the meaning is accessed or defined with words within the same language, in the later the meaning is gained or translated in different language. In fact, either way seems to suffice. What matters is the speed and easiness to comprehend the meaning. If the English learners find it easier and faster to understand a sentence of the target language in their first language, which means they translate it, then that is surely more effective. In other words, whenever translation works better in

the effort to obtain the meaning, compared to paraphrasing, that is the best for the students.

I shall argue that translation can provide ways to comprehend inputs for the second language learners in an easier and faster way. This somehow fits to what Krashen (in Zhang & Gao, 2014:31) says that 'An essential factor for language acquisition is input that is comprehensible'. Translation can be used by the language learners to negotiate the meaning at their convenience. Moreover, Titford (1985: 78) supports the idea by saying, 'Learners of a foreign language do refer to their mother tongue to aid the process of acquisition of L2 or, in other words, they translate silently'. For the second language learners to refer to their mother tongue seems to be unavoidable. This makes sense as people can think or process meaning/information better with the language they know best.

Furthermore, translation can help language learners realize the differences and similarities in forms and semantics between the source and target language. This can lead them to act wisely in terms of linguistics. Teachers using translation as one of their methods in language teaching should not forget to alert their students the fact that there is no one-to-one correspondence between a word of the source and target language. The fact is self-evident once the language learners start to translate. Also, the students should be warned that one language may have idiosyncratic way in expressing something. This is to prevent their production of target language is interfered from their first language. All in all, translation should help the students aware of the possibility of expressing one thing in different ways.

Some researchers using translation in their classes indeed have concluded that translation is a motivating activity. Mogahed (2011) collects some studies which indicate positive feedback on using translation as a method in language learning. One of them is research by Carreres (2006) who 'conducted a questionnaire and came to the conclusion that learners overwhelmingly perceive translation exercises as useful for language learning, ... and translation, by its very nature, is an activity that invites discussion and students are only too happy to contribute to it, often defending their version with remarkable passion and persuasiveness'. With this in mind, translation can be used as a method in language learning in a more communicative and productive fashion.

## **Modification of GTM**

The efficacy of the GTM may vary in terms of the purpose of the language learning. Hence, teachers should do analysis to students' needs of language learning before deciding which method to be applied. The GTM in its original version may still be considered a fine method for students trained



to become translators. However, for students who are more concerned with the development of their oral communication skills, it may not meet their needs until it is modified.

Having presented some theoretical basis of the importance of both grammar and translation in language teaching above, I now hope to offer some modifications of the GTM. To begin with, the teachers are supposed to use the target language as the medium of instruction in the class rooms either in teaching grammar or in asking the students to translate. This can increase the linguistic chances or exposure of their students to the target language particularly in their speaking and listening skills. This favors the teachers, especially if they are non-native, and the students since both sides can practice and get themselves more exposed to the target language. Language is both about competence and performance. The English learners' knowledge about the target language must be used in practices. Moreover, such way of learning can help build a situation in which the teachers and students can use the target language in a spontaneous and natural fashion. For most of second language learners to get exposed to the real situation, in which the target language is used, especially for Indonesian students, appears to be out of reach. They learn English in their home country and are taught by non-native teachers. No doubt that such imaginary English community will assist the students to improve particularly their oral communication skill.

Suppose the class used English as the medium of instruction, some modified GTM could be used as a method in language teaching. *First*, on the part of the teaching grammar, the teachers should avoid teaching the grammar in such a detailed way that it demands further linguistic explanation. Explaining 'husband' is etymologically derived from 'hus' and 'bondi' may not be necessary. Instead, they can ask their students to produce orally as many sentences as possible by means of following certain grammatical rules. This will assign students a greater part in language teaching process.

*Second*, in relation to translation, teachers should prefer the students to do oral translation to written one. Therefore, the class can save time to do something else, for instance, the students are asked to prepare more than one translation of a single sentence before comparing them to the others'. As a result, the class will expect to hear more translations than the number of the students in it and each student is expected to defend his/her translations as among the best. In fact, translation activity can offer the students the freedom of expressing their ideas in a peculiar way through their unique translations and can check their comprehension at the same time. In addition, translation from the first language into the target language should predominate as this can acclimatize them to use the target language more

than their native language. However, if the direction of translation is from the target language into the students' first language, the teachers can ask their students to do back-translation from their first language into the target language again.

By instructing it in the target language, the class, to some degree, can be run in a less teacher-centered way as the students are given a greater time to use the target language. It is expected it is the students who do most of the talking and it is the role of the that to facilitate the class. In this way, the GTM can engage the target language with its communicative function.

## CONCLUSION

This article hopes to observe the importance of both grammar and translation, two linguistic features making up the GTM, in language teaching and the ways they are taught that can possibly uncover the bright side of the GTM. While it may be true the GTM is now less appropriate as a method in language teaching, it can be modified in some ways, as explained before, so that it can serve the teachers to vary their language teaching processes. In view of that, I am not suggesting the modified GTM should be used at the expense of other methods. Needless to say, all methods of language teaching, old and new, are useful and they can be treated as being complimentary to one another. With this in mind, a richer teaching methodology can be gained which can lead to a better process and output of language teaching.

As frequently stated above, one of the chief rejection to the GTM is because the class uses the students' first language as the medium of instruction. This state prevents the students from having ample exposure to certain skills and disengage the target language from its communicative function. To avoid this, the teachers should try their best to use the target language as the medium of instruction. However, the case sometimes is more complicated particularly in Indonesia. To use English as the medium of instruction has become a trouble for many English teachers. As once complained about by Bloomfield (in Hughes, 1968), many teachers teach the language which they cannot really speak. This inconvenient truth surely poses another problem to the success of language teaching and learning. If that is the case, it is no longer a matter of which method is in use.

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